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SUBJECT: BOUCHER AND FRENCH POLITICAL DIRECTOR ARAUD TALK
FRANKLY ON AFGHANISTAN, CENTRAL ASIA, PAKISTAN AND INDIA

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a March 1 meeting with Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Political Director Gerard Araud offered frank views on Afghanistan, counter-narcotics in Central Asia, and France-Turkey relations and offered recommendations aimed at helping to ensure more French buy-in for NATO and security programs in South and Central Asia. On Afghanistan, Araud promised that France would fulfill its Riga commitments to move troops out of Kabul as required, but lamented that many in the French Government, beginning with President Chirac, still do not understand the importance of the NATO mission there; he urged the U.S. to intensify its efforts to convince both the French Parliament and the next President that Afghanistan is winnable. He suggested that better information-sharing with French political leaders before the onset of major NATO operations might go a long way toward keeping them engaged and easing suspicions. On Central Asia, Araud said the Foreign Ministry believes that joint counter-narcotics campaigns offer a means to solidify the region's relations with Europe, and he expressed interest in learning more about INL and what the U.S. does to help stanch poppy cultivation and drug trafficking. On Turkey, Araud complained they would not allow French overflight, even to repatriate a soldier wounded in Afghanistan, in what he characterized as a petty retribution for a proposed law criminalizing denial of the Armenian "genocide." Araud and Boucher agreed that this was more than a bilateral discussion as it affected the effective functioning of the NATO alliance; Araud vowed France would raise the issue in Brussels. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) At Boucher's March 1 meeting with French MFA Political Director Gerard Araud, Araud was joined by Didier Leroy, DAS-equivalent for South Asia, Jean-Louis Falconi, director of CFSP, Francois Richier, DAS-equivalent for Disarmament and Nuclear Proliferation, and Francois-Xavier Carrel-Billard, advisor to Foreign Minister Douste-Blazy. Pol Minister Counselor, SCA Senior Advisor Caitlin Hayden and Poloff (notetaker) joined Boucher.

Turkey Refuses French Overflights

¶3. (C) Araud rushed to the door to greet Boucher with the

"outrageous" news that Turkey had recently refused overflight rights for the purpose of medevac a French soldier from Afghanistan. Turkey had already retaliated against a measure passed by the French National Assembly criminalizing the denial of the Armenian "genocide" by refusing the annual renewal of its bilateral overflight agreement with France, but Araud said he had assumed they would relent for a NATO mission. Araud promised the French would "make a scandal" in Brussels at NATO. He further complained that the French Ambassador had become a persona non-grata in Ankara and that Prime Minister Erdogan had ordered a curtailment of economic cooperation with the French, even though the National Assembly bill has not yet been passed by the Senate and is explicitly opposed by the Government of France.

Afghanistan

¶4. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher thanked France for its assistance in Afghanistan, but urged further contributions, noting that it still ranks 26th among international donors. He added that when the time comes this spring, he hopes France will honor its Riga commitments to move troops from Kabul to the south in extremis. Araud promised that France would respond as pledged, but acknowledged that a gap remains between "the decision in principle and the decision in action...We must prepare our political authorities to send troops outside Kabul." Araud added that France is committed through the EU to police training and soon will be adding 50 new trainers to the Afghan National Army.

¶5. (C) Araud offered his views on why the French public and the political establishment are so reluctant to commit fully to Afghanistan. The prevailing sentiment is that "foreign forces can never win in Afghanistan," an impression that

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relies upon analyses of British and Soviet defeats in the 19th and 20th centuries. Further, he joked that "Afghanistan is one of the only countries we've never invaded or slaughtered," so there is no sense of a historical obligation as in the Middle East or Africa. Finally, he identified a widespread conviction in European capitals that NATO countries are only in Afghanistan "to show the Americans that NATO is still relevant," a motivation he characterized as "fragile politics."

¶6. (C) Araud urged the U.S. Embassy to redouble its outreach efforts to Parliament and the French media to explain why the NATO mission is essential to international security and relevant to France itself. Further, he said he was worried about talk from both presidential candidates implying a reduction of France's overseas commitments; it will be important for the U.S. to explain to the new administration why Afghanistan remains an essential operation.

¶7. (C) Boucher responded that history proves that while foreign invaders may founder in Afghanistan, Afghans themselves can win with foreign assistance. However, he concurred with Araud's assessment of outdated European thinking on Afghanistan, observing that parliaments, operating on last year's information, were pessimistic; the media, operating on last fall's information, were critical; and the governments, operating on up-to-date information, understood. To which Araud retorted: "except our president, who operates on last century's information," referring to President Chirac's analysis of the 19th century defeat of the British and 20th century defeat of the Soviets.

¶8. (C) Boucher added that what disturbed him most was Araud's sense that Europeans were only in Afghanistan to appease the U.S., and not out of recognition of the fact that Afghanistan will remain a source of international terrorism "until we finish the job." Araud agreed that Afghanistan is an EU mission, too, but countered that it is essential to overcome the European tendency to confuse the very different missions of Afghanistan and Iraq as identical instances of "American

imperialism."

NATO Information Sharing

¶19. (C) To sustain French political support for Afghan operations, Araud proposed that NATO open clearer lines of communication to political actors before military operations.

While he acknowledged that the military must preserve its commanders' autonomy, "it is not possible for our president to hear of a military offensive from the press." Araud suggested that a meeting with NATO Ambassadors prior to an offensive would likely placate the French presidency and save face with respect to the sacrosanct issue in France of political control of the armed forces. Boucher agreed that information management campaigns are an essential part of NATO missions.

Counter-narcotics Cooperation

¶10. (C) Araud said the Foreign Ministry has come to acknowledge the importance of counter-narcotics as an anchor for Western countries' relations with Central Asia and Afghanistan. Narco-trafficking is one of the few challenges that consistently unite Central Asia, Iran and Pakistan with Europe and the U.S., he explained. He offered that when the French Ambassador to Tehran proposes a joint counter-narcotics strategy, "it is one of the only times he is always greeted with smiles and enthusiasm." Araud expressed strong interest when Boucher explained what the U.S. and UK are doing in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and said it would be worthwhile for the French to schedule working-level meetings with INL to learn more.

Pakistan

¶11. (C) Araud said French thinking on Pakistan had evolved from the longstanding impression that the Pakistanis were not doing enough on counterterrorism. "After seeing terrorism in Pakistan itself, it's hard not to listen to what the Pakistanis are saying. True, they have limitations, but

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they're doing enough to be getting killed." He asked for Boucher's assessment of the Pakistani proposal to mine the Afghan-Pak border. Boucher characterized it as the type of idea put forward in the absence of any better plan, noting that President Musharraf did not raise the notion in private diplomatic exchanges, and was therefore not likely serious about it.

Central Asia

¶12. (C) Araud openly described Central Asia as "a soft point in our geopolitical assessment" and asked Boucher to offer his own insights. He was particularly interested in Boucher's view of sanctions on Uzbekistan, explaining that his personal view was that the U.S. and EU have limited their leverage by implementing sanctions that are "totally ineffective." Boucher disagreed, explaining that many Uzbeks argue that the government has been compelled to reform in the hopes of seeing the burdensome sanctions lifted.

India

¶13. (C) Araud and Boucher commiserated on the difficulty of forging an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation when the Indians allow their atomic energy scientists to dictate the negotiations. Araud said the French Foreign Ministry unsuccessfully tried to impress upon the Indians the urgency of reaching agreement with the U.S. and then work with the Nuclear Suppliers Group, as both Pakistan and Israel are discovering that they could be excluded by the Indian approach. Still, the French were frustrated when their advice went unheeded and the Indians took nine months to respond to their last proposal. Araud said Philippe Errera, DAS-equivalent for Arms Control, was currently in New Delhi

trying to get the nuclear agreement back on track.

Sri Lanka

¶14. (C) Araud said he had been unaware of the April meeting of the Contact Group in Washington, but DAS for South Asia Didier Leroy thanked Boucher for the information and said France would attend. Araud shared his assessment that the Feb. 27 Tamil Tiger attack on a helicopter carrying foreign diplomats -- including the French and American Ambassadors -- was in fact aimed at the Minister of Rural Development, who has been effective in implementing measures to staunch Tiger activities.

¶15. (U) SCA Senior Advisor Caitlin Hayden has cleared this cable.

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